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The Theatre of Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players by Sarah Gorman
New York and London: Routledge, 2011, xx + 152 pp, ISBN 9780415990929 (hardback)

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For readers outside New York who have had exposure to the touring work of Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players, the company will most likely be associated with an apparently signature style: a seemingly paradoxical realism in which the actors declaim fragments of everyday speech with a stilted, non-naturalistic emphasis that has been described as 'deadpan', 'flattened', or simply 'bad acting'. Sarah Gorman's new monograph on their work offers an expanded and contextualised analysis of this style, locating Maxwell's work at the unusual intersection of a certain neo-realist tradition of mainstream US playwriting (Miller, Shepard, Mamet) with an anti-naturalist body of experimental performance practice (Foreman, The Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment). But more than this, she makes a persuasive argument for reading Maxwell's formal explorations as having a wider relevance than simply a self-reflexive examination of theatre and theatricality. Instead, Gorman argues, both the form and the content of the theatre of the New York City Players are carefully crafted in order to utilise the theatre as an appropriate location to stage and critique issues of masculinity, labour, and the 'non-place' of contemporary US American culture.

In this way, Gorman addresses one of the recurring questions in contemporary performance criticism: where do we locate the political in postmodern (or post-Brechtian, or 'postdramatic') theatre? As she notes, *Village Voice* critic Tom Sellar has grouped Maxwell together with a 'downtown' theatre culture that eschews political engagement in favour of 'cool eclecticism and irony, formalism and fragmentation' (quoted on p. 17). And Maxwell himself certainly avoids any explicit political identification, declaring that 'political theatre doesn't work' (quoted on p. 16). Gorman connects Maxwell's formal ambiguity and sometimes confounding content, writing that 'it is impossible to generalise about where his work should be located politically or generically' (p. 29). But rather than interpreting this ambiguity as a lack of political relevance, Gorman suggests that there is a politics in these paradoxes themselves: 'By citing the conventional in an unconventional way he opens an aperture for audiences to glimpse contradictions inherent within received bodies of knowledge about ontology and the role of the individual within Western capitalist society' (p. 29).

Gorman's analysis is as attentive to the narrative content and kinds of characters present in Maxwell's plays as it is to the stylistic choices he makes as a director, and she argues that these are interrelated concerns. His characters are often blue collar workers inhabiting a non-descript corner of the US cultural landscape: 'Maxwell does not write plays about influential, socially mobile decision-makers, but instead creates theatre about lower class, socially constrained characters affected by corporate and legislative decisions' (p. 102). In this context, Gorman suggests, Maxwell's directorial choices are not stylistic indulgences but directly relevant to issues of linguistic expression, self-definition, and emotional articulacy – issues that are part of the lived experience of the kinds of people about whom Maxwell writes. For example, Maxwell describes his techniques as intended 'to relieve the burden of "emoting" by the player' (quoted on p. 36). Gorman connects this idea with the expectations on the (working-class, male) subject within a culture of affective labour and therapeutic self-empowerment.

As such, it is perhaps not insignificant that performer Jim Fletcher describes his work as 'industrial acting' (quoted on p. 23).

Gorman argues that one political dimension enabled by this mode of performance is the making visible of that normally invisible category of heteronormative masculinity, which emerges into view as it becomes strained and fallible in its theatrical representation: 'Maxwell's approach to directing and casting is informed by a drive to encourage the audience to read for signs of gender fallibility (a failure to "repeat" appropriate gendered behaviour)' (p. 70). Drawing on socio-linguistic and psycho-behavioural studies of masculinity, as well as the more familiar Butlerian arguments, Gorman describes Maxwell's work as staging 'masculinity in crisis' (p. 70); this is a theatrical crisis, but it is not one that is limited to the theatre.

Similarly, Gorman argues Maxwell's exploration of the dynamics of the theatre-event might be connected with wider cultural concerns in relation to the issue of space, referring to Marc Augé's diagnosis of the contemporary proliferation of 'non-places' in which relationality and 'character' are absent. In what she describes as Maxwell's 'rehearsal aesthetic', we are reminded of the 'here and now' of the performance, and theatrical production is framed as a kind of labour (pp. 96-8). However, Gorman implies that this differs from the typical Brechtian move, in that such self-reflexivity emphasises the theatre's continuity with the world outside the theatre rather than its separation: 'The slippage between the hermeneutic world of the plays and the auditorium invites a reconceptualisation of the theatre as a place of "socio-political commentary" [citing Gay McAuley] and, in Augé's terms, an "anthropological place"' (p. 116). As throughout her study, Gorman illustrates this argument through detailed consideration of the range of Maxwell's plays, populated by salesmen, security guards, service-industry workers, and cowboys all wrestling with 'the internalised mindset of political equality and the apparently "limitless possibility" consolidated in the popular imagination by the Western frontier and the American Dream' (p. 115).

This book is grounded in several years of dialogue with Maxwell and other company members, as well as observation of his rehearsals and productions, but Gorman makes no claim to speak on behalf of Maxwell; these arguments and interpretations are her own. Neither does the book attempt to serve as documentation of his work, and where it does present a chronology, it does so through the lens of a specific critical argument. Some familiarity with the work will be helpful, and those seeking a 'definitive' account of the theatre of The New York City Players, or a concise introduction for themselves or their students, will not find it here. (Playscripts and videos are available from the company's website: www.nycplayers.org.) However, this careful and nuanced study will be of interest to those thinking about the performance of gender (and masculinity in particular), the peculiar labour of the theatre, or the politics of apparently post-political theatre.